

Tim Marx: Our capacity to help has been stretched to its limits

As poverty has increased, so has the pressure on our St. Paul shelter for the homeless. This is a canary in a coal mine.

Article by: TIM MARX

We are a compassionate community, and we have common sense. We know that recent reports of increased and persistent poverty, homelessness and unemployment mean despair for those experiencing these tragedies, as well as unnecessary costs and diminished quality of life for all of us due to lost productivity and increased use of social and emergency services.

During the last decade, the percentage of Minnesotans living in poverty rose from 6.5 percent to 10.8 percent, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. By 2010, one out of every 10 Minnesotans lived below the federal poverty line -- annual incomes of less than \$22,050 a year for a family of four or \$10,830 for a single adult.

More recent figures suggest that poverty rates have increased even more. According to the American Community Survey, 11.6 percent of Minnesotans lived in poverty by the end of last year. The poverty rates are greater within Minnesota's communities of color: 17.8 percent for Asians, 24.4 percent for Latinos, 37.2 percent for African-Americans and 39.5 percent for American Indians.

The systems and safety net on which we have been relying are being overwhelmed. You can see, hear and feel the human tragedies playing out in our communities.

If you've been in downtown St. Paul in the last several weeks, you will have seen -- in the shadow of our Capitol, the Cathedral, and the commercial and entertainment center -- people camping near the Dorothy Day Center. This is reminiscent of the "Hoovervilles" that sprang up across the country during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

For 30 years, the Dorothy Day Center has been a place where single adults without a home -- recently as many as 250 -- could get a simple mat on which to sleep, adequate food, and connections to the resources necessary to move on. Some, particularly those who work, move on quickly from a temporary crisis. Others, struggling with mental and chemical health issues, stay longer. At Dorothy Day, we turned away no one for lack of space.

Until now.

This summer, for the first time, Dorothy Day simply ran out of space to serve safely and humanely all those who knocked on our door. Thirty people were turned away in July, 40 in August. By Sept. 20, we had turned away 52 people, and the month has yet to end. In July and August, about 650 people camped on surrounding open spaces. Some nights, as few as two people camped; other times it was 30 or more.

For those we can assist at Dorothy Day, nearly half report having no income or health insurance. Increasingly, people come directly from other institutions that face challenges of their own -- group homes, mental hospitals, jails. People of color are disproportionately represented among those we serve (62 percent), and almost 20 percent are 55 or older.

We help people such as Jane, who arrived from a mental health institution and suffers from schizoaffective disorder, anxiety and depression. We help people such as Tom, who rented a room in a house and was evicted because the landlord was foreclosed upon and gave him no notice. Many people, such as Dave, land on our doorstep after being released from prison, having no place to go.

The program director for Dorothy Day, Gerry Lauer, reports that people who come to Dorothy Day have nothing left and feel embarrassed and ashamed. You can see the physical weight of the existing day on their shoulders, he says, because living on the street takes a toll on people.

What is particularly sad is that we know better, and we were doing better.

Until the onset of the Great Recession, homelessness had decreased as government, nonprofits and businesses worked together to create housing and a mix of employment and other support options to sustain people and provide hope. This, combined with 20 years of effort and hundreds of millions of dollars of investment in the downtown St. Paul riverfront, provided new jobs, welcoming public spaces and a variety of housing options and entertainment venues, all of which sparked an urban renaissance.

We need to get back on track before we backtrack too far. What's going on at Dorothy Day is a canary in the coal mine for the entire region and state. Poverty and homelessness need to be solved, not hidden or moved.

We need a growing economy in which all can participate, to have expectations of everyone, to support and help those who need it, to invest strategically in our public and social infrastructure, and to develop collaborative partnerships. We know how to do this. We've learned much from the past and from ongoing efforts. We can do even better now if we all do our part to put our compassion and common sense to work.

Tim Marx is the CEO of Catholic Charities of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, which owns and operates the Dorothy Day Center in downtown St. Paul.